

A Food Coloring Guide: All about Colors

Color is so important! It is what attracts people, it draws them in! This is especially true when trying to appeal to potential customers, in the baking and cake decorating world. Chefs, bakers, and home cooks have come to realize the importance of food coloring and therefore often use it to add flair and visual appeal to their creations. Color not only adds excitement, it is also a great way to tailor/individualize it for the person it is being made for. Furthermore, although food coloring does not add any desirable flavor to food, it can be used to influence the palate.

Have you ever seen a beautifully colored cake with lots of beautiful eye-catching colors? And/or purchased some food coloring only to not achieve the same look/color you wanted? Well, you are not alone. This is because not all food colors are created equally.

When you think of food colors, most people typically think of liquid squeeze bottles that you can purchase at the grocery store. These were great products when we first started out, coloring icings, play-dough, eggs, and many other mediums. While this liquid coloring seemed to be the only option available, today there are many other choices, from Gels, Pastes, Candy Colors, Air Brush, and even Powdered Colors.

For individuals who work on larger projects and need more vivid colours, they generally use gel paste colours. Food colouring paste and oil based paste are great for cream-based mixtures, such as fondant and buttercream, as it does not modify the consistency of the mixture. These are also used for foods that may separate with the addition of water, such as white chocolate. Paste and powder food colouring can be found in cake decorating shops and specialty food stores. Knowing which one to use, when and what for can sometimes be confusing. Let's start with a brief description of each.

Types of Food Coloring:

Liquid food color

Is the most familiar type of food coloring; however because of its liquid consistency, it tends to thin out or break down icings and other similar materials. Its color is the weakest among all food coloring, but it is easy to obtain since it's widely available.



Water Base – Available in a wide variety of establishments; these colours do not produce a deep colour but are ideal for pastel shades.

Gel Paste Color

Gel – Paste Coloring is very concentrated in color and only requires small quantities when using it. The colors are more vivid and intensify/deepen as they sit. The gel like substance is thicker than liquid food colors, and is effective in dyeing large amounts (for example batter & icings). Not suitable for coloring chocolate.



Many gel paste colors have a glycerine base – More of a gel form; Ideal for all mediums as it does not change the consistency of icings, rolled fondant, marzipan or other forms of sugar pastes. A very economical product and offers the widest range of prepared colours. This type of food colour is available in cake decorating supply shops.

Candy Color (Oil Based Colors)

Candy colors characteristically appear to be very similar to gel paste colors, however rather than having a water base as the foundation they are oil based colors. Oil Base colors are primarily used for coloring chocolate, as these colours do not contain water. These colors also work well with hard candy. They are strong vivid colors, and typically cost the same if not a bit more than gel paste colors. They are also good for icings, and all forms of sugar paste; Available generally in cake decorating supply shops.



Powdered Color

Powdered colors can be broken down and grouped based on the "effects" or "finishes" you are looking to achieve. Typically powders are a highly pigmented color. Much like paint, you can choose from the wide range of finishes, for example you can have a matte, sparkly or metallic color as well as the effect. The main types of powders are called:

“petal dust” – matte finish,

“luster dust” - has a bit of shimmer mixed in with the color

“pearl dust” – is a pearlescent dust with a hint of color as an undertone

“Hologram/ Disco dust” – needs to be sprinkled onto a surface, cannot be blended in

“sparkle dust” - which is very sparkly and tends to be a bit more coarse in texture

“Metallics” - which come in various colours but you also have true silver and gold tones available



Note: different companies or countries may have different names for these types of colors or finishes.

Powdered colors are very shelf stable, and will last years if they are not cross contaminated with any other product. Powdered colors are also great to color chocolate and or cocoa butter. They can be mixed with vodka, gin or a clear alcohol base as well as with lemon juice or vanilla extract to be turned into a wet paint, which then can be added to icings. The paint mixture can also be used directly on harder sugar mediums such as gum paste, fondant, marzipan, royal icing, cookies and more.

Airbrush Color

Airbrush food coloring is designed to be a much thinner food coloring than gel food coloring, however all ingredients are the same, just a higher water content. These colors require an airbrush compressor machine to work. Water Base for Air Brush – specially formulated so that there is absolutely no sediment in the colour (sediment will clog an air brush). May also be used for tinting icings; Available in cake decorating supply shops.



You should be aware when buying food coloring that there are two main categories available: artificial and natural.

Artificial food coloring

Is widely used and is synthetically produced. Typically artificial food coloring tends to be less expensive and more concentrated and uniform in color than natural food coloring. Artificial food colors also have a large range of available colors. Although there are some general concerns and/or split views regarding artificial food colors, buyers should look more deeply into the main differences between natural and artificial coloring and decide for themselves.

Natural Food Coloring:

Natural food colors for the most part do not create the same intense colors as the artificial colors do, nor does it have the same color range available. Depending on the color and where it is derived from, the natural color may not blend as easily either. Although, many tend to prefer a natural food color because of its organic properties, allergies may be a concern. Another concern with natural food coloring is the taste; sometimes the natural product will leave the product with an undesirable taste to the food it is being added to.



Colours

It is a good idea to have a basic knowledge of colour mixing, just in case a specific colour is required.

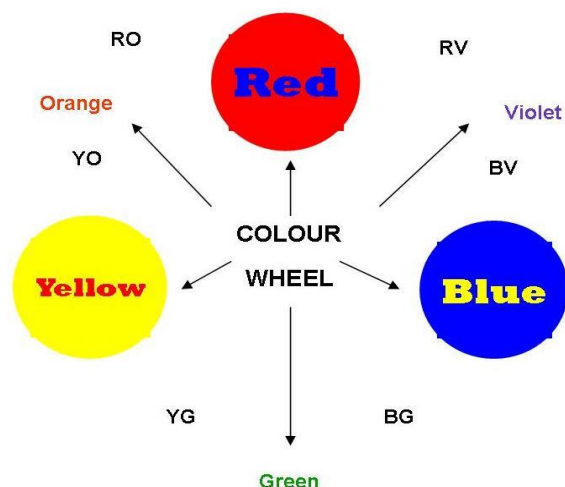
There are 3 primary colours – red, blue and yellow. These colours cannot be made by mixing any colours together. All other colours are made by mixing 2 or 3 of these primary colours together. When purchasing colours, take a look at the label to see which colours are used to make up that shade – by doing so, you'll have an idea as to the make-up of that colour.

When deciding on a colour scheme, some have a little difficulty in putting the “right” colours together, for others a colour wheel is a wonderful tool where guidance is needed. The wheel indicates blending and contrasting colours. The following is a description of basic colour combinations using the wheel. Cake Decorating stores have mixing charts that are available, which can be a great help.

Monochromatic – using various shades of one colour

Contrast – using opposite colours on the wheel Eg. Red/green

Triadic – using three colours evenly spaced on the wheel



Notes and tips when working with color:

Each individual has their own preference when it comes to colour schemes. However, It is recommended that pastel to medium shades be used for celebration cakes and for children cakes, the best choice would be bright vibrant hues.

For those who prefer natural ingredients, colourful pastries can be had with natural food colouring. Vivid colours are everywhere in nature, it just takes a little know-how to apply them. Also available are ready to use natural food colors additives that are derived from plants and minerals, are considered Natural Colors which do not contain artificial and synthetic ingredients such as FD&C dyes.

Using colours and determining the right combinations becomes easier as you build experience. Don't be afraid to experiment – you'll be pleasantly surprised!

Remember a little bit of color goes a long way. Letting the food colours sit in the icing will allow the colors to intensify as they sit. You can always add more color to the icing later if you wish to achieve a darker color.